



“Learning to Live”

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Hayward, California**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2009
Ephesians 2:1-10**

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

Pepper Swanson

Today’s scripture reading presents a bit of a mystery. Read for years as a letter from Paul to the Christian community in Ephesus in Western Turkey, many Biblical scholars have come to the conclusion that while the letter is clearly a letter written by a Jewish Christian to encourage gentile Christian converts to persevere in their new lives and with their new church, it was probably written by another evangelist, one using Paul’s name and style, possibly a little later in the first century or into the second century, and possibly not specifically to the church in Ephesus that Paul had helped establish, but to all the churches in that area.

Among the important differences between Ephesians and a Pauline letter, say 1 Thessalonians, is a shift of perspective on the end time. Paul, as you may remember, was an ardent believer that Christ would return imminently and that belief in the resurrection was imperative to ensure one’s salvation. In Ephesians, believers are exalted now and the culminating event of Christianity is not in the near future as much as it is already a reality to be celebrated.

The focus of today’s scripture is on salvation and how it changed the life of the believers addressed. Interpreting it today raises many basic questions for the seeker in all of us. If we are “saved”, what are we saved from? If we are saved, what are we saved to? How is our life, our death, our afterlife different if we are saved than it might otherwise have been? And if we can be convinced that we need to be saved and that the state of salvation would be better than not being saved, what must we do, what must we believe, to achieve and maintain our salvation? Let us ponder the questions of salvation as we sing our musical meditation and prepare to hear the scripture read.

MUSICAL MEDITATION “God of Grace and God of Glory” (v. 1)

№ 436

God of Grace and God of glo-ry, on your people pour your power;
Crown you’re an-cient church-’s sto-ry; Bring its bud to glo-rious flower.
Grant us wis-dom, grant us cour-age,
for the fac-ing of this hour, for the fac-ing of this hour.

SCRIPTURE READING

Susan Whiting

Ephesians 2:1-10 (TNTAP)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with Christ in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

SERMON

Pepper Swanson

Today's good news is best understood by imagining that you are a new convert to Christianity awaiting your baptism on Easter morning. After leading the life of a Gentile, worshipping a variety of gods and participating in cultic practices, you are about to take the plunge, both literally and figuratively, into a new phase of your spiritual life. Today's scripture is meant to bolster your decision and help you move forward into your new religion and your new life. Imagine being at your high school graduation and having a favorite aunt come to you and, say: "Oh, my! Look at you! Here you are, all grown and ready to go into the world, where so many wonderful things await you!"

The anonymous writer of Ephesians expresses the thought a little more emphatically than most aunts; and naturally so, because the world that awaits the new believer will make all the difference between life and death, between being saved and being lost. If this section of the letter had been condensed to a modern, more casual way of communicating, it might read: Can you believe it, you were dead before, but now you live! What a gift of God! Keep the faith!

If it was me, sitting on the hard pew, waiting to be called forward to profess my faith, hearing it declared that I was dead in my life, dead in my trespasses and sins, might shock and give me pause to think. Me? How have I been dead in my life?

Oh yeah. Without much effort, I can think of a few times. Most of us can remember when we have been, if not dead, almost dead, or for want of a better term: a mess, spiritually speaking. It isn't always apparent to others what bad shape we are in, but we have all had times when we hit rock bottom in one fashion or another, times we wouldn't want to repeat. It is in these moments when we are most prone to be "dead" in our life, because these are the moments when we find ways—emotional and physical—to cut ourselves off from either the pain we feel inside or from the people who might perceive our pain and insist we do something about it.

I've become something of a student of moments like these in the last six years. In 2003, I was diagnosed with breast cancer for the first time. And as those of you who have struggled with either your own cancer diagnosis or the diagnosis of a loved one know, cancer, like heart disease and other life-threatening illnesses, can really, really, spiritually speaking, mess you up. As a patient, it's not uncommon to become afraid that you will die and leave behind all you know and love. Or to feel dead from the treatment itself and its far-reaching effects on your physical, emotional, and social life. Or to be afraid to live when living means potentially facing cancer again and again. Those who love cancer patients struggle with what to say and how to support the one they love, even while they are facing their own fears about how cancer will change their life by changing the one they love.

When I was first diagnosed, I wasn't afraid of dying as much as I was afraid that having cancer would interfere with plans I had for living. I had oriented my entire life to the imminent arrival of an unnamed baby from China. When the doctors outlined the year-long course of treatment, involving chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation, I just tearfully nodded and accepted whatever they said would get me to "our baby" as we called her then. I don't have words for how distressing and destructive my year of treatment was to both my body and soul. I just know that through it all—the drugs, the nausea, the loss of my hair, the mouth sores, the agonizing surgical decisions, the hospital visits, the endless blood tests—I kept my eyes on the prize: a beautiful baby girl that I would hold and cherish. We finally went to China between my second surgery and radiation and came home with 11-month-old Lia Victoria, whose name means double victory; one for her, the triumph of having family, and one for me, my triumph over cancer.

With Lia home from China and radiation complete, it was time to restart my life. But, as it turns out, having a needy and very active one-year-old after being under chemical and surgical assault for a year isn't easy, and it's made doubly hard when a 40-something mom, desperate in her yearning for a child, has completely idealized what having a child is like. It wasn't long before my regular post-bedtime ritual was to sit down and have a long cry. Around the time Lia peaked in her terrible twos (which was actually, to my great surprise, a three-year period), I began to feel a little numb and then increasingly to think, when I had time to think, what I wanted most out of life now was...out. Out of life. I struggled every day because I could not see either the short- or long-term point of living.

It occurred to me at the time that it's not healthy to go around thinking like that but for some reason I was absolutely and completely paralyzed to do anything about it. I emphatically did not want to go to therapy, which I had found useful before; I did not want to go back to work; I did not want to write poetry, stories, essays, all of which I had always enjoyed and hoped to do more of as a stay-at-home mom. Fortunately, no matter how bad I felt, I loved my husband and was committed to being Lia's mom, even if getting her to go to bed each night made me grit my teeth so hard I thought they would crack.

I didn't realize this until I looked at a calendar, but my salvation came in the form of preschool. In September 2005, Lia was two years and nine months old and we signed her up for two full days of preschool so we could have a weekend together without her, even if it happened in the middle of the week. By November, Scott was pushing to add

one more day of preschool to our weekly schedule, and by January I had signed up to be a docent at the Berkeley Rep, had resumed an interest in theatre, and was sitting down regularly to write my first theatrical play.

Unfortunately, just as I was settling in my new life and approaching the vaunted five-year mark for cancer survivorship, I was diagnosed with a recurrence. It was as, if not more, shocking than the first time. As if to counterbalance the length of my first treatment, my second treatment was lightning fast. Within a week of my second diagnosis, I had my third surgery and was home from the hospital and fighting a familiar sinking feeling.

This time, salvation came in the form of a church: just a week after my surgery in 2007, our family joined Eden. I like this church. I like the people. I'm happy that we have so many seekers here so I can be comfortable trying to figure out what it means to live and to die. I'm glad that there is so much work that needs to be done. While it wasn't easy to get back to writing—the play is still incomplete—it was easy to slide into the Board of Community Ministries and into being an occasional liturgist. Not much time passed and I was feeling a little more alive, a little more grounded.

Last winter, as I was writing what would become my first sermon and trying to make an important medical decision, I found myself pondering a question about life and death. I wondered, as any Christian who has struggled with a life-threatening issue might: if salvation means we have everlasting life after death, that our souls will live on after the death of our bodies, why is life itself so important? Why protect and cling to life if death is just a gateway to a better plane of existence? I e-mailed Arlene: Where exactly in the Bible does it say that life is sacred? (Clearly I wasn't just looking for any answer—I wanted an authoritative answer!) She wrote back: In Genesis 1—it says, “God made life and he called it good.”

Life is good. Life is good. I've made that my mantra for awhile now. For now, after feeling so bad about the cancer and how hard being a mom is when things don't go as you expect, it's a new way of thinking. I add it to all sorts of other sentences and life equations to see how it feels. For example, “I need to live,” which I know is true because I love Scott and I love Lia, especially now that she's six and goes to school five days each week, and I love all of you. If I add “life is good” to the front of that, I get: Life is good, I need to live. Then, it follows logically, if life is good, and I need to live, then I better be learning to live again.

And going to school is part of that. My volunteer work here at Eden led me to start a certificate program at the Pacific School of Religion last June. Ironically, in a recent Christian Ethics class, I was assigned to defend the sanctity of life perspective in a medical case where half my class felt the cancer patient should die rather than have access to the bone marrow of a developmentally-disabled but willing brother. I got to say “life is good” in about 17 different ways. By the end of the class, I believed it.

Telling you my story, which I share as testimony of how just a couple of my own moments of being dead in life turned around, calls me back to today's scripture from Ephesians. The text draws a clear line between not being saved and being saved. On

one side of the line, you are a mess. You are following the wrong path and you are so deep in the mud that you are unresponsive to the world around you, spiritually speaking. You are for all intents and purposes, dead. On the other side of the line, you are not only on the right path, out of the mud, but are lifted so high in the air that you sit with Christ in the heavens.

Salvation may work that way. Sometimes it may only take one big event to pull you out of the really deep mud. For me—and maybe for you too—it seems like it's more of a cycle than a one-time jump of the broom. Sometimes you're in the mud and sometimes you aren't. In, out. In, out. But whether it's one time or many times, I believe salvation has a lot to do, as verse eight of the reading says, with grace, faith, and Christ. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God..."

Grace is a gift of God. It comes in many forms. Look at my story today—grace came as a preschool, as a church, and as a message from a theologian. Grace is not life itself but a transformation of life and an open invitation to learn to live in new ways, in a new relationship with God, the one who loves us completely, forgives without reservation, and want us out of the mud as soon as possible.

Faith is, in many ways, the flip side of grace. Some say it is the utter reliance on God's grace. It is trust in the reality, power, and loving nature of God. Faith is believing, every time you are in the mud, that God wants you out of the mud. Faith is acting like you want to live again and faith is learning to live again. Faith takes practice; and that's okay because almost anything worth learning requires a little bit of practice every day.

I think Jesus knew something about being in the mud and what it's like to be dead in the world. He looked straight into the face of so many people who were dead to the world by so many reasons and he called them to live again. He faced his own emotions honestly and he tried to teach us how to live so we wouldn't fear death or its consequences. And most importantly, he lived, he died, and he lived again. Like each of us, occasionally and in our turn, mired in mud, or dying in spirit, or dead to real life, Jesus was dead and then lived again. Believing in Christ's resurrection is to believe that no matter how bad it gets, no matter how far gone we are, no matter how afraid we are to live or to die, we too can learn to live again.

So today, on this fourth Sunday in the season of Lent, there is good news. We all have been dead in our life at one time or another. We all are awaiting new life. Though we do not know what form it will come in, we all will be baptized by life itself and will learn to live again. Easter comes for all of us. Let us rejoice in God's grace, in our faith that life is good, and in our commitment to learn to live as if we will live.

Amen